



U.S. AIR FORCE

This Week in USAF and PACAF History 11 – 17 April 2011



16 Apr 1916 **The Lafayette Escadrille was established** as a squadron of mostly American volunteer pilots flying and fighting for the French Air Service during World War I. The planes, mechanics, and the pilot uniforms were French, as was the commander, Captain Georges Thenault. The squadron was originally named the *Escadrille Américaine*. For reasons of international diplomacy, the unit was re-named to honor the French military hero who aided the American Army during the American Revolution.



15-16 Apr 1928 The **first flight across the Arctic Ocean** was made by World War I aviator and Arctic explorer Carl Benjamin Eielson, together with Australian explorer Hubert Wilkins. The flight from Point Barrow across the top of Greenland to Spitsbergen covered 2,200 miles and took 20 hours. Eielson was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and won the 1928 Harmon Trophy for the greatest American aviation feat of the year.

Eielson died in a crash the following year while attempting to rescue 15 passengers of a cargo vessel trapped in ice near Siberia. In 1948, Eielson AFB, Alaska was named in his honor.

11 Apr 1942 The Curtiss-Wright Company unveiled its **first production C-46 Commando**. The C-46 eventually became the largest and heaviest twin-engined aircraft used by the US AAF. Due to its load capacity and high-altitude performance, the AAF primarily used it in the Pacific region and it became an important factor in the success of the “Hump” airlift over the Himalayas.

11 Apr 1944 **MEDAL OF HONOR** Edward Michael was an AAF aircraft mechanic strafed at Wheeler Field on 7 Dec 1941. In 1944, Lt. Michael was a B-17 pilot flying missions in Europe.

On 11 Apr 1944, enemy fighters riddled his plane with shells. Fire filled the bomb bay, but the emergency release did not work. Lieutenant Michael ordered a bail-out, but the bombardier’s parachute was damaged. Michael and his copilot stayed with the aircraft. The bombardier found a way to manually release the weapons. The pilots dodged enemy fighters down through a cloud deck, but they broke out into accurate flak. They flew back to England at treetop level. Michael told the other two men to bail out with the remaining chutes, but they refused. The landing gear, flaps, altimeter and airspeed indicator did not work, and the ball turret guns and bomb bay doors



were jammed downward. The aircraft threatened to break apart on landing. Nevertheless, Michael belly-landed the B-17, saving the lives of his fellow crewmembers. Read the full, amazing story at this [website](#).



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11 Apr 1966 **MEDAL OF HONOR / AIR FORCE CROSS.** Near Cam My, South Vietnam, A1C William H. Pitsenbarger (right), a pararescue jumper, hoisted nine soldiers to safety aboard a HH-43 Huskie and then remained behind to treat the wounded amid heavy mortar and sniper fire. Despite several gunshot wounds, he continued to treat the wounded soldiers until fatally shot. He became the first airman to receive the Air Force Cross posthumously. The Air Force later upgraded his award to the Medal of Honor. Read A1C Pitsenbarger's complete story in [airforce-magazine](http://airforce-magazine.com).



14 Apr 1972 **BATTLE OF AN LOC.** Through 30 June, C-130s airdropped 4,853 tons in 359 sorties to the besieged garrison at An Loc to help prevent a North Vietnamese take over. After losing five aircraft to enemy ground fire, C-130s used high-altitude airdrops for the first time. Flying above the lethal range of enemy anti-aircraft fire, the airdrop effort suffered no further losses. Improvements to the parachute opening mechanisms and payload cushioning helped achieve a 90% effectiveness rate. By the time the road routes to An Loc reopened on 23 July, the C-130s had flown 763 sorties to deliver 10,081 tons of supplies. B-52 attacks provided essential close air support to embattled troops in An Loc.



11 Apr 1973 **Project SCOOT** (Support Cambodia Out of Thailand). Through October, USAF C-130s flew 1,290 sorties from U-Tapao AB to deliver 3,314 tons of rice to Phnom Penh, and 7,055 tons of ammunition to Cambodian forces. They also airdropped another 39.7 tons of rice.

16 Apr 1973 **USAF B-52s resumed bombing against North Vietnamese positions** in Laos following reports that communist forces overran a town in the Plaine des Jarres.

15 Apr 1974 **CAS Fly-Off.** Under Congressional pressure, the Air Force began a fly-off between the Fairchild A-10 and the LTV A-7D Corsair. The fly-off showed the A-10 to be more capable in the close air support (CAS) mission. The A-10 carried a larger payload and a more lethal gun—the GAU-8 30mm cannon. The A-10 was judged more survivable after being hit by enemy ground fire and its maneuverability made it less vulnerable to air-to-air losses. Pilots felt the A-10's maneuverability would also be a great asset in providing effective CAS to ground units, especially during limited visibility or low ceiling weather conditions.





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14 Apr 1986 **Operation EL DORADO CANYON.** The US retaliated against Libya for its involvement in terrorism with an airstrike. F-111s from RAF Lakenheath conducted the attack, supported by five EF-111s from RAF Upper Heyford. Navy aircraft also struck Libya from the USS America and USS Coral Sea (14 A-6Es, six A-7s and six F/A-18s). The aircraft successfully hit targets at Benina Airfield, Benghazi Military Barracks, and Aziziyah Barracks in Tripoli. During a long, circuitous flight around France and Spain, the 24 F-111s were air-refueled by 28 KC-10 Extenders and KC-135 Stratotankers, flying out of RAF Fairford and RAF Mildenhall. The tankers refueled the F-111 strike force four times, maintaining radio silence during the entire mission. The US lost one F-111 in the attack. On the return flight to the UK, the tankers refueled the F-111s two more times. (Artwork by Ronald Wong.)



17 Apr 1999 The **first RQ-1 Predator flight into a combat zone** was made during Operation ALLIED FORCE when the Predator performed reconnaissance over Serbia.

16 Apr 2004 **MACKAY TROPHY.** Near Kharbut, Iraq, two USAF HH-60G helicopters were dispatched to rescue the crew of a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter that had crashed in a sandstorm. The brown-out conditions left the rescue crews' infrared and night vision goggles ineffective. Flying through multiple surface-to-air missile attacks, the HH-60s flew visual approaches to locate, rescue and evacuate all five Army crash survivors. For their outstanding actions, the HH-60G aircrews earned the Mackay Trophy. (See file photos below – HH-60Gs and brown-out conditions in southwest Asia.)

